

## **The Largest Park in Illinois**

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The largest state park in the state of Illinois, Pyramid State Park, is located in Perry County, Pinckneyville, Illinois, not far from where I live. Pyramid State park is one of the best-kept secrets because people often think Pere Marquette in the Alton area is the largest park in Illinois.

Originally, Pyramid State Park only covered 924 acres; however, today it consists of over 19,000 acres. Southern Illinois University, which owned the property, initially used the 924 acres for research. In 1968 Southern Illinois University donated the 924 acres to make it a state park. After the college was so generous, the Governor George H. Ryan bought over 16,000 acres to give to Pyramid State Park.

Pyramid State Park was named after a large coal mining business that operated in the area. Experts say that the first whites to discover coal were Joliet and Marquette in LaSalle County. The Native Americans used much of the coal for their by-products, using coal in pottery making. Strip mining, or as it is called today, open cut mining, was used in the early 1800s. A team of horses pulled a plow taking off the first layer of soil. Miners would then follow with picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows to pick up the coal. After many years of piling up rock and soil, the Illinois reclamation law of 1962 came into effect.

The most common way of reclamation during this time was through tree planting. Even though this would not bring any quick economic return for the park, nevertheless, hundreds of trees were planted. On the west side of the park is a twenty-acre area that

had never been strip-mined, where you can find a hardwood timber consisting of white oak and hickory.

As one wanders about the park, there are many wildlife species that can be seen including songbirds, deer, squirrels, beavers, rabbits, turkeys, bobcats, raccoons, possums, coyotes, weasels, woodchucks, wits, and minks. Some of these creatures are dangerous and some are not.

You will find hiking trails, visitors sitting down enjoying a picnic, camping, fishing, hunting and boating, which you can all do at the Pyramid State Park. As for trails, there are 16.5 acres around the park where you can hike or ride your horse.

However, the most popular activity at the park is hunting, and that is how I discovered Pyramid State Park. The park includes archery, firearm, muzzleloader and handgun hunting for white tail deer, and if you visit during springtime, turkey hunting is an option. Other species that can be hunted include rabbit, quail, and waterfowl.

The current acreage in Pyramid State Park is separated into two hunting areas; the main park of the park is the East Conant Hunting Area. This area allows for traditional hunting, and is one of the state's quality hunting sites including several thousand acres that had never been mined. When visiting this area you will find hundreds of fenced rows and wooded areas.

Deer hunters are only allowed to shoot white-tailed deer that have a minimum of four-points on each side. These rules are in place to protect young deer. Limiting the number of hunting days helps increase the wildlife populations, including some extremely large bucks.

One of the hobbies that I enjoy is fishing, and Pyramid State Park has plenty of fishing lakes. More than five hundred acres of water is available at the Pyramid State Park. In many acres of the park, lakes formed that vary in size from one-tenth of an acre to two hundred seventy-six acres. Anglers will find largemouth bass and bluegill in most of the ponds and lakes. There is also good fishing for crappie and redear sunfish. Many of the lakes are stocked annually with channel catfish. Since most of the lakes can only be reached by foot, it gives fishermen an opportunity to enjoy nature and get away from the crowds.

Pyramid State Park is an excellent vacation spot for any family. Over 200,000 visitors a year come to the park, and, with the new expansion and opportunities, it is expected that the number will triple in the next few years. Giving a family a chance to enjoy the outdoors and a peaceful vacation has made Pyramid State Park very successful. Also, it is only a few hours drive from some major cities including St. Louis, Paducah, Peoria, Springfield (Illinois), Evansville and Memphis. [From Bill Bailey, *Illinois State Parks*; Lonnie Russel, Richard Goldstein and Les Winkeler, *Enjoy Southern Illinois*; Lynn Soli and Barbara McCaig, *Illinois Parks and Forests*;

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<[http://www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/hunter\\_fact\\_sheetRSHFS/pyr.htm](http://www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/hunter_fact_sheetRSHFS/pyr.htm)>; and

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